

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Ron Yamakawa

"And the thing is that when you look at the state foundation's collection in its entirety, it is like it's a compressed version of the art history of Hawai'i. Because we've strived to represent all of the various media, I think it really shows the growth and the course that visual arts took over the years the Art in Public Places (program) has been acquiring works. So I think when you look at it in those terms, I think people would be surprised how each medium has evolved."

Ron Yamakawa was born in Honolulu in 1948 and graduated from Kaimukī High School. After serving in the navy during the Vietnam War, he entered the University of Hawai'i, where he majored in secondary education with an emphasis in arts education.

In 1975, Yamakawa became art instructor at Honolulu Junior Academy and developed the school's art curriculum. A year later, he joined the State Foundation on Culture and the Arts [SFCA] as assistant state art curator. Today, Yamakawa is manager of the Art in Public Places program.

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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Ron Yamakawa (RY)

September 5, 1990

Honolulu, O'ahu

BY: Joe Rossi (JR)

JR: This is an interview with Ron Yamakawa conducted September 5, 1990, on the University of Hawai'i campus. The interviewer is Joe Rossi.

Mr. Yamakawa, how about if we begin with your youth. Where were you born, and when were you born?

RY: I was born in Honolulu, Hawai'i in 1948, grew up in Kapahulu, went to Waikiki School, which was real funny, because I found out recently that in the fifties there was this English standard thing [i.e., segregating of students according to their ability to use English correctly]. And Jefferson (Elementary School), which was right next to us, was considered the English standard elementary school, and Waikiki was for the so-called dumb people. But this was before my time. And so now when I tell people that I went to Waikiki School, they look at me (strange)—the older people, like people who are in their sixties, 'cause they all went to maybe Jefferson or Roosevelt High School, which was the English standard high school. I just bring that up 'cause I find that amusing, especially among some of the older artists who know how that was going. But I went to Kaimuki Intermediate School and Kaimuki High School and basically grew up playing by the wall at Waikiki (Beach). We used to go diving and surfing right across from the [Honolulu] Zoo.

JR: And what did your folks do when you were growing up?

RY: Well, my father was a (plasterer and a veteran of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team in World War II). My mother was a secretary for the city and worked for the Honolulu Redevelopment Agency.

JR: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

RY: Yeah, I have a sister named Sandy who is a couple of years older than I am. She's a teacher at Ka'ahumanu Elementary School now, and being my big sister, was someone I looked up to. (She minored in art and is a very talented person in her own right.)

JR: Other than surfing, what kind of stuff were you interested in during your school days?

RY: Well, I'm glad you asked that, because up until about the fourth grade I was interested in art a lot. I did a lot of drawing and painting. But about fourth grade, you know, it's like art became something for the girls to do, and sports was more the thing for the boys. And I was pretty athletic, so I turned more towards sports. I started judo in the fifth grade. I got my black belt when I was a senior in high school. Basically, we played football a lot in Paki Park in Kapahulu, and basketball—the normal things that boys do. (I also played football for Kaimuki High School.) When I was in the seventh grade going to Kaimuki Intermediate we formed a club among the boys from Kapahulu and eventually became affiliated with Kaimuki YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association]. So we had a lot of sports and social functions that were sponsored by them. And we went carousing and, you know, that kind of stuff.

JR: So after the fourth grade, then, you dropped art altogether?

RY: Well, it was, like I said, something that was considered kind of for the girls. And although I still enjoyed it, it was not something that I ever took as an elective in school. The last art course I remember taking was when I was in the eighth grade. And I didn't take any art courses in high school. The funny thing was, when I went to intermediate school they told me I was pretty smart, so I started aspiring to be a successful smart person (chuckles) and getting into things that would prepare me for college. A lot of my friends from those days, or my classmates, are nuclear engineers and that kind of stuff. But I was wanting to get into business, accounting, and that kind of stuff.

JR: What about around your house? Did your parents listen to a lot of music? Or did you guys go to any Japanese *Bon* dances or things like that, or even to the [Honolulu] Academy of Arts?

RY: Well, not especially. (My parents enjoyed popular music, but rock and roll was noise to them.) We would go to *Bon* dances every year, but it was more. . . . Like we'd go to movies at Kapahulu Theatre or that type of thing. As a kid, I went to a lot of samurai movies in town at Toyo Theater. And because I went to Nu'uanu YMCA during the summers, from the first through the fifth grade, I had a lot of exposure to what was happening in town. After the YMCA was over, we'd trip out and walk around town, and just generally get streetwise, you know. (Chuckles) It was neat. I remember also Kapahulu Theatre had the (Donald Duck or Porky Pig) Club on Saturdays, so we'd go over there, all our friends and stuff, when we were in elementary school.

My father was a bowler, so he enjoyed bowling. And my mother was basically the family cook, and took care of us, and played mah-jongg with her sisters on weekends. So we didn't have a lot of direction as far as cultural activities or arts and that kind of stuff. I was more influenced by an older cousin of mine—who was like six years older than me—who went to Roosevelt. (Chuckles) And he was like a

hot-rodder. This was in the fifties, so. . . . When I was in elementary school and he was in high school, I was hanging around, you know, while they were working on their cars and stuff. So I don't think that I can say that I had any inclination that I'd end up being in the arts profession at all.

JR: So at the time you graduated from high school, you wanted to still be an accountant or successful businessman?

RY: Yeah, I entered the University of Hawai'i [UH] as a pre-business major and (chuckles) flunked out after my first year. Well, they asked me not to come back actually. (Laughs) But yeah, I was still intending to go into business.

JR: I know that at some point you joined the military.

RY: Oh yeah. Well, this was in 1967, which was the time of the Vietnam War. And the draft was going pretty good, so I tried to avoid it by joining the naval reserve, which allowed me to stay here and go to drills for one year. (During that time I worked in a Waikiki hotel as a desk clerk and went to a lot of rock concerts.) But then after a year I got called up to active duty and served for two years in the navy. You want to know about my navy days? (Chuckles)

In the navy I was stationed on three (different) destroyers. I was lucky enough to have scored high in my entry exams, so they put me in the ship's office as a personnel clerk. And so I had it pretty easy. I didn't have to work on the deck (chipping paint) with the other guys. (I spent a year stationed at Pearl Harbor and continued to enjoy all the crazy things that were happening here in the late sixties.)

Eventually I was transferred to a ship that was stationed in Yokosuka, Japan and spent some time in what is called Westpac—Western Pacific—cruising around Japan, the China Sea, Vietnam. When I was in Japan, probably the one thing that started me towards art was I bought a camera, which got me into photography. And that was fun. In fact, I still have that camera. Gee, it's twenty years old now. But that was a good growing experience, being in the military.

JR: I'm curious---at that time, did you consider photography an art form?

RY: No, not really. It wasn't until I came back and started going back to the university that I really thought about it. But in those days, it was more like taking snapshots—like a tourist, you know—like documenting what you were doing. And I don't have a lot of pictures, although we did get to go sightseeing a lot. So I got a few pictures in Japan, especially of some of their major attractions, like (Mount Fuji), the Buddha in Kamakura, (and the attractions at Expo '70 in Osaka). We went to the Philippines. It was a very interesting time. Because when you're like that age, in your early twenties, and in the military, you really feel like you don't have anything to lose. So you're going to do whatever is good fun. We didn't get into any big trouble, but we had some good times.

JR: Let's, maybe, get back to Hawai'i now. Somehow you got back into the UH. How did that happen?

RY: Oh, yeah. Well actually, I guess I was on academic suspension. And in those days they'd suspend you for a year or something. So by the time I got back I could re-enter, so I did. And I was still a pre-business major and did a lot better, being more mature and wise to the ways of the world. I eventually got into taking the major courses in business, like accounting, economics, statistics, and that kind of stuff. It was during the first or second semester that I was back that I took the Art 101 class taught by Duane Preble. And he impressed me quite a deal, quite a great deal, with his sensitivity (and concern about the environment. And I realized how important teachers are as role models to young, impressionable kids.) Not to say that I immediately switched majors, but I feel like he was a big influence on my life.

JR: Was that a course that you were required to take or one that you had just selected?

RY: It was like an elective to fill in, I guess, your—whatever it is they call it.

JR: So it was like a core-requirement elective.

RY: Yeah, yeah. Around that time---well, when I got into taking accounting, the second accounting course, the instructor kind of really turned me off with his attitude about business and how you have to be coldhearted (in order to be successful). It turned me off to the point where I dropped his course and decided to change my major. In looking around at what I could get into, I had a few choices. But I decided that I wanted to become a teacher. I felt like the world was going to pot, and we needed some good teachers. (I also felt that I could take summer classes and work my way towards becoming a school principal to satisfy my managerial aspirations.) And I felt confident that I would be successful in whatever I would pursue. Not to sound arrogant or anything, but. . . .

Anyway, I switched over to elementary education, thinking that it would be neat to teach young kids. But eventually I switched to secondary education and had to declare a major. And it was like, okay, what do you want to teach? And it was kind of simple to me. It's like I didn't really want to get into anything heavy, so I was looking at either PE [physical education] or art, which by that time, because of Duane Preble's influence, I had. . . . I guess there was this renewed interest.

JR: Did you have to then take a lot more art classes before you graduated?

RY: Oh, yeah. It was as if I were an art major, so I had to take all the studio courses, a lot of art history courses. And being in the College of Education, I wanted to have a well-rounded background in as many different media and techniques as I could get. So I took—and they require it anyway—courses in all of the different media, except for printmaking, and found that I could relate best to the ceramics and sculpture areas, which I took more courses in.

(Pause)

The other thing, too, was that I was kind of heavy into surfing (and rock music) at that time, so my teachers might not remember (chuckles) that I was in their classes. I spent a lot of time surfing in those days. Actually, I got to know most of the teachers who are still here at the university now. They were all like just starting out in those days, so they were full of energy and enthusiasm—people like Fred Roster, [Frank] Beaver, Suzanne Wolfe. It was really an interesting time on the UH campus, down at George Hall [where the Art Department was then located] (and over at the ceramics and sculpture lab).

JR: After taking in some of these studios and that, did you begin practicing ceramics or sculpture outside of what was required for the class?

RY: No. My outside activities were mainly surfing. (Chuckles) I was kind of hard-core in those days. You know, we'd surf in the morning, go to class, surf in the evening, and it's every day. Basically that was my outside interest. And if the waves were up, we were at the beach and not in class. But I took a lot of pictures with my camera. But I didn't really consider myself to be an artist. I thought of myself more as a teacher. And when I switched over to secondary education and declared art as my major, it was because I wanted to (provide an alternative to) the stereotype of the limp-wrist art teacher who was kind of effeminate. I thought that I could provide this other type of role model for the kids, the local kids, which I was once before, too. That was about it. I was into surfing and (rock concerts).

JR: Where did you go when you graduated [in 1975]?

RY: Well, I was lucky enough to be hired by Dorothy Douthit at the Honolulu Junior Academy [HJA] (right) after I graduated, and took a position there as the art teacher. Dorothy was in her first year as principal, and we had a great time. It was a real small private school. I was allowed to pretty much develop the art curriculum for them, so I pulled out all the stops and tried to do everything. I taught photography, ceramics—we bought a new kiln—sculpture, drawing and painting, batik, the whole works. It was like—my approach was to try to work individually with each student, and find out where their interests were, and, you know, turn them on to being creative.

JR: How was art in that school? Was it something that was required of all the students? Or . . .

RY: No, it wasn't. It was an elective. It was great. I mean, we had small classes, like about eight kids to a class, so I could really work with them a lot individually. And I learned a lot that first year—how to deal with people and kids and stuff.

JR: Did you feel that you were successful in terms of being able to motivate local kids—I guess guys, in particular—that art wasn't something for, as you put it, the limp-wrist crowd?

RY: Yeah, I felt real good about the boys that I did have. You need to understand, though, that HJA was quite an exclusive school. It was for kids (whose parents) could afford the (high) tuition. I think one of the major attractions about the school was that it had a real strong reading program for students who were weak in that area. We had a small student body, but it was funny seeing kids driving Mercedes and Ferraris to school. It was like, wow! But I felt like I got through to them, and we could relate to each other. I felt pretty successful.

JR: Did you feel that maybe these upper-class kids had a greater awareness of the arts than maybe some of the—just the average Joe off the street?

RY: I think, yeah, it's probable, but they were just kids. Mostly they were intermediate-level students, and they were all, you know, growing up and wanting to do what all other kids do. But I would say, yeah, they naturally grow up with art, with pictures on their walls, and with their parents going to the symphony and that kind of stuff. A lot of them had prominent parents who were members of the board of trustees of the [Honolulu] Academy of Arts or this and that. And so I'm sure that they were more aware than your normal local kid from Kapahulu or someplace like that.

It's like, when I was growing up there wasn't a lot of art on the walls. I guess nowadays—I think the foundation [i.e., State Foundation on Culture and the Arts] has influenced a lot of people over the last twenty, twenty-five years. Those of us [who] have grown up and become parents are much more aware and want to spend money to put art on the walls or buy sculptures or that kind of stuff. Whereas, I think when I was younger, in those days it was more traditional. (It was different because a lot of people my age are third generation, and we spent a lot of time with our grandparents, who brought their cultural and artistic tastes with them from whatever old country they came from. So we had those kinds of influences. I give them and our parents a lot of credit for being able to assimilate in a real chop suey bowl of cultures.)

But yeah, the kids nowadays—or when I was teaching, they definitely had a taste of the more artsy stuff, the cultural stuff. Like they were probably dragged off along to the symphony or that kind of stuff, too, which is good to round you out as a person. The boys were all into hard rock and that kind of stuff, of course. What else would teenagers do?

JR: So you were there for how long before you became aware of SFCA [State Foundation on Culture and the Arts] position?

RY: Actually, I think I saw the advertisement in the Sunday paper probably around February of that first year that I was teaching. It said "assistant state art curator," and wow, that sounds impressive. And they were offering more money than I was making, and it sounded like a very challenging job. So I applied and was interviewed by Alfred Preis. And eventually I was hired [in June 1976]. I was shocked! (Chuckles)

JR: What did you think your chances were when you applied?

RY: Oh, I didn't really give much thought to what my chances were, you know. I just thought I'd take a chance. I know that for me to apply I must have at least thought that I had a slim chance, but I didn't really think that I would be considered that seriously. But it was a good way to find out what was going on in the world, the real world, and check things out, since I had decided to pursue art as my career.

JR: Before we get into the SFCA, I just wanted to ask you about one thing that—mentioning art as a career, what did your friends, the guys you used to surf with and things like that, what was their opinion of you teaching art now?

RY: Now? (Chuckles)

JR: Or then, you know, back then . . .

RY: Well . . .

JR: . . . in the early seventies.

RY: Well, a lot of my friends were in art, too. Of course, I have other friends who are in other lines of work, but the group that I used to hang out with was—gee, one guy works at Pearl Harbor, another guy is an unemployed farmer. Well, I figure I'm supporting him 'cause my taxes for unemployment or social welfare go to his support. I have other friends who are very successful in business, couple of teachers. . . .

JR: They weren't at all surprised, then, that here's Ron teaching art at a private school? (Chuckles)

RY: I guess not. It's like I was always kind of—I think their opinion of me was that I was kind of opinionated and outspoken. I should say greasy, right? (Chuckles) But I guess, being from where I was from, you don't have real high aspirations. Like I didn't have any friends who wanted to be a nuclear physicist or anything when I was a kid growing up, or an art teacher, God forbid. But a couple of my closest friends are in the arts—or [friends] from when I was a kid. And in fact, one of them, I should give him credit for advising me to take art. He's now a lawyer in New York City, but he was an art major and graduated in sculpture. So I think most people were surprised, probably. My sister, who is a teacher, was certainly surprised that I'd get hired. (Chuckles) That's what education does, it at least qualifies you for positions.

JR: Getting back to the interview for the SFCA job, was that the first time you had met Alfred Preis?

RY: Actually, no. I had met him once before at Washington Place, when Mrs. [Jean] Ariyoshi, the governor's wife, at that time—this was about '75—held a drawing

contest among school kids to determine her Christmas card for the year. One of my students was entered. So there was a reception at Washington Place for the kids. And Alfred Preis was there, and I got to shake his hand and meet him. But I didn't realize who he was at the time.

JR: Did you know about the SFCA at all? Let me put it this way, what did you know about the SFCA when you applied for that job?

RY: Not much. Very little, actually. I knew it was a state arts agency, but I really didn't know what they did. In fact, reading about the position in the newspaper was surprising to me. I didn't know much about the state having an art collection. (Pause) Well, I take that back. I guess Duane Preble had---yeah, in college I guess the teachers were all talking about that kind of stuff. And some of the professors had commissions with the state foundation. But it was not something that I really thought about a lot. I was more into surfing. I didn't pay a whole lot of attention in school.

JR: I have to just stop now to turn the tape over.

RY: Okay.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

JR: You mentioned that you were surprised when you got hired by Preis to work for the SFCA. What was it that you were hired to do? What was your task?

RY: Well, (officially I was responsible for the relocatable works of art collection). One of the first things I had to do was read the legislative audit of the foundation [that was issued in March 1976] and start doing things that would correct the deficiencies. And the audit was very critical of the administration of the Art in State Buildings program, which was what it was called at that time. The surprising thing is that I was the assistant state art curator [but] there was no state art curator. Nobody was in that position. They hadn't even tried to recruit for it. They didn't have authorization to recruit for it. So basically it was Alfred Preis who was doing whatever was being done in the program area. And he had some part-time help over the years previously to assist with the collection and its development and that kind of stuff. But it was all done with just part-time help and cooperation from a lot of different people on different islands, mainly from the DOE [Department of Education].

At that time, one of the first things I had to do was develop the inventory system, which consisted of a five-by-eight-[inch] card with a Polaroid picture on it and a handwritten description on it, at that time anyway.

JR: For each work?

RY: For each work. Well, for most of the works.

(Laughter)

JR: Some had no card?

RY: Some, I don't know. It was like they were in this cardboard box, and some of them had no pictures. And by that time the collection was about probably over 900, not including gifts. So in all I would estimate the collection exceeded 2,000 pieces at that time. But no, cards for every piece was not possible, I don't think, at that time.

So I started doing research. I got a lot of help from people at the academy of arts. I remember [registrar] Sanna Deutsch helping me. (And the academy's curator of extension services, Ruth Tamura, was incredibly helpful.) And the Contemporary Arts Center---[director] Laila Roster was really a great help at that time.

JR: What kind of help did you need?

RY: Well, to set up an inventory system which would enable us to keep track of where the works were, 'cause it was a rotating collection, as well as the photographic documentation, which consisted of slides and photographic prints. And we wanted to include explanations of the works. So I had to work out a system which ended up being a quadruple cross-reference type of thing. It's still in use today. But at that time, I had to find out how other art collections kept records of the works.

And realizing that we were a public collection where works would be relocated, Alfred Preis told me, "You have to remember, too, that because these works are going to be relocated, they're going to wear out, some of them." So, you know, we needed to figure out how we would take care of that part of it, the maintenance, the deaccession, which is like disposal, that sort of thing.

So eventually, we ended up with a series of five-by-eight-[inch] cards which included one permanent card in numerical order which was for inventory—called our inventory card—and carried all of the information related to a single work of art; a file card on that same piece which had a photograph and information on it, plus the location record on the back; and an artist inventory card which was filed by artists and showed us how many works by each artist were in the collection. And then that all cross-referenced with the slide collection, which—gee, we must have like 35,000 slides, you know. Well, that was about it. That was the first major task that I had.

JR: Did you have any idea what you were getting into?

RY: No, but it was so challenging and exciting that it was real enjoyable. But no, I didn't have (chuckles) any idea what I was getting into.

JR: What was your reaction when you read that audit for the first time?

RY: Well. . . . See, the thing was that when I read it, for each criticism I read the state foundation's response. So I thought that the auditors were being really unfair, because, basically, the foundation didn't have any staff to do what they were saying it was supposed to be doing and other funding types of resources to carry it out. So I thought it was unfair and felt like all we needed really was staff and money to take care of the problems, and a little bit of support.

JR: But the problems existed, though, at that time?

RY: Oh, definitely, definitely.

(Pause)

JR: What were your first impressions of Alfred Preis?

RY: I was amazed by his speech. He has this real neat way of talking that is. . . . Well, he told me one time that he learned the English language out of a dictionary. And it's very peculiar. But I thought that he was driven and highly dedicated to the work of the foundation. He was just extremely knowledgeable in all kinds of culture and arts topics. And he seemed like a real renaissance man to me. And one of the most amazing things was that he supported such a wide variety of arts or culture and arts things with equal compassion. And, you know, I just tried to soak up as much of his philosophy as I could.

JR: How closely did you two have to work?

RY: Well, he was the boss, and I was the eager young whatchamacallit (chuckles) trying to find out what the job was all about. So I was his gofer for several years, and we worked real closely. He's the type of person who needs to be involved in the work. He knew what kind of results he wanted, I think, and was very picky about how things were done. But he, after a while, started letting me do things my way, but I always tried to do them my way in a way that I thought was his way. I get kind of emotional thinking about him, because he was kind of like a father figure and a guru to me.

JR: A lot of people call him an art czar. I think you're the first person I've heard call him an art guru.

RY: Well, I don't know. I look at it like, he was the first director of a brand-new agency that was established to formulate policies and set the standard for culture and arts in Hawai'i. And I think he did a fantastic job at it. I can't say enough for the knowledge and understanding he had of what it really was that needed to be accomplished through the foundation. His philosophy showed so much compassion for the different cultures (and art forms) that it was something that I always wanted to emulate and support. (He could talk days on the subject, and I just tried to soak it all in.)

(Pause)

JR: Aside from your interactions with Preis, did you sit in on the board meetings or anything like that at that time?

RY: Yeah, in those days board meetings were big affairs, and the whole staff was there. Of course, the whole staff was pretty small. (Chuckles)

JR: How big was the staff when you came aboard?

RY: Well, when I came aboard, let's see, we had a . . . Well, Alfred Preis had a secretary. We had a planning and budget officer, an account clerk, and myself as the primary staff. We had a lot of people working for the SCET [Statewide Comprehensive Employment Training] program and CETA [Comprehensive Employment and Training Act] program who would come and go throughout the day, because they were more like field coordinators in the different disciplines, like dance, music, theater, that kind of stuff. So the permanent staff was actually, aside from Alfred Preis, four people—three people, because our (account) clerk was, I think, a CETA position also. So it was a really small staff. Susan Mitchell, who was the planning and budget officer at that time—you know, she carried a major load also. But it was just us. And when it came to board meetings, we were all there. And basically Mr. Preis did the talking, and the staff was just there to provide information or details for him.

JR: I guess the reason—I shouldn't beat around the bush. The reason I brought up the board meetings was because the audit that we were talking about gave the impression that Mr. Preis made the decisions and the board went along with whatever he felt was right. Now, you came aboard after the audit was already done. Was it a give-and-take kind of thing or was it still. . . . Did it seem to you still that Mr. Preis sort of set the direction and the decisions for the foundation?

RY: Well, I think that, from my observations, Mr. Preis (had) a very strong influence on the decisions that the board made. At that time [Masaru] "Pundy" Yokouchi was the chairman. And I felt like they were doing the right thing, you know. Basically, it was a lay board who were interested perhaps in the arts but certainly did not possess any kind of expertise in depth. And Alfred Preis was working very closely with the leaders of the culture and arts communities, and the recommendations that he was making to the board were the result of consultation with a lot of other people who—well, now we call them consultants or community resources. But I think he was doing, at all times, what he felt was in the best interest of the state, and (after) serious consultation with others. The board---well, since I was there after the audit, the audit was something that they were concerned about. But I felt that they were very supportive of him and recognized that he was someone who had the expertise, and he did his homework. So unless it became a matter of opinion, I think they usually deferred to him, to his judgment.

JR: Were you getting out into the community at this point, going to art openings and

shows, and galleries and museums and the like?

RY: Yeah. In fact, early on I skipped an opening, and the very next day, he [i.e., Preis] came up to me and said, "You will go to openings, otherwise I (shall) find someone else who will." And he made it real clear that openings were important functions and that the presence of the foundation staff was necessary, both to encourage the (artists and) people who were sponsoring the exhibits and to give credibility to the functions. Because in those days, the foundation was pretty much the only buyers of art aside from the Contemporary Art Center. And Mr. Preis was trying to establish or promote the philosophy that art was for everybody and not just a few elitist types. And he really wanted us to be involved in community affairs. In fact, he made it real clear to me that the legislature had approved the permanent positions for the foundation because they felt it was necessary (for the state) to have staff expertise on a continuing basis. Otherwise, you know, our positions could be appointed, and there would be no continuity. But he felt strongly that the only way we could grow as staff professionals was to get out there and interact with the people who were the players, in the visual arts community in my case and in the other areas in the case of other people. Yeah, he encouraged it. (Chuckles) He demanded it, actually.

JR: You mentioned something when we were speaking prior to the interview a couple weeks ago about going to an opening or a show with Mr. Preis and selecting works. Would you care to talk about that?

RY: Yeah, sure. Another one of Mr. Preis' strong commitments was (to) giving recognition to artists. And one of the main things about the Art in State Buildings program was that we could buy art from exhibits, aside from commissioning art. And he felt real strongly that in order for an artist to gain the recognition which came along with a purchase award was to have the selection made before the opening reception, when most people would be attending and when the artist would be there. So he tried to make it a point to get a committee together to go and view the exhibit before it opened. And a lot of times, because he was doing everything, he wouldn't have enough time to get it all together. So sometimes the afternoon before the opening, he'd come rushing out of his office and tell me, "Let's go." We'd go over to the gallery and go through it and make selections.

He had a very good eye, and he could pretty much zero in on the best work relatively quickly. Of course, I felt like I was just there to learn, and I was kind of hesitant about voicing my opinion because I didn't really feel that confident about judging, especially abstract art. I mean, in college I was more into finding out about materials and techniques. So for that part, I was pretty confident. I could tell you what an intaglio print or lithograph or whatever was. But as far as critiquing content and composition, it took me a while before I felt confident about making judgment. Because you're messing with these people's careers and their feelings.

Anyway, I was lucky enough to be dragged along with him. And he'd try to call up members of our board to go along with him. At that time, Bob Gahrn was the chair of the visual arts committee of the board, but he was on Kaua'i. He was the

director of the Kaua'i Museum. And I recall Phyllis Bowen coming a lot since she was very interested in the arts. Well, we'd just go out and hit it. He was very articulate in critiquing works, and he would always explain his reasons for making his selections. That's something that I thoroughly enjoyed and tried to pick up on.

JR: Did you have any preferences at that point? You just mentioned that you maybe didn't have the eye for the abstract art.

RY: (Chuckles) Well, he'd always ask me, you know, "What do you think is good?" And I'd tell him what I liked and try to explain in the artistic lingo. But after a while--- I remember one time he told me, "I knew it, it's the biggest one." (Laughs) I like big stuff. I guess my intent was to try to find pieces that would fit the kinds of office spaces that I was dealing with. But to me, it's much more impressive to see a larger work that is well done than to see a medium-sized work that is well done. It was funny when he told me that, 'cause, you know, he had my number. (Laughs)

JR: Review panels were set up at some point, where community members could take part in advising, I guess, SFCA on its decisions. There's something called the Acquisition Awards Selection Committee.

RY: Right.

JR: Is that a review panel for . . .

RY: Yeah, that's a fancy name for our selection committee. And it was already in effect before I started. It's just that there wasn't always time, and we weren't always notified of the shows, like through invitations and that sort of thing. A lot of times we'd get a call the day a show was opening and find out then that there's this thing going on and have to rush out. But if we had enough notice---and the foundation was instrumental in sponsoring many of the shows that have become regulars, like College Art, the Hawai'i Craftsmen shows, the Watercolor and Serigraph Society, which has split into two different groups now. But the foundation sponsored a lot of the shows, so we knew about them. And, of course, there was Easter Art which was held at Ala Moana Center. So we would have enough time to put together a committee. And we'd normally ask some highly respected person from the arts community to come along to help us, and call up members of the visual arts committee on our board. So most of the time, we had probably five people coming along. Now the process is much more formalized, and we won't go unless there is a committee. But it was my job to put together the committee after I learned the job. Basically he would tell me which consultants would be appropriate, because there are a lot of potential conflicts of interests out there among artists and who they work for and that kind of stuff.

JR: When did the committee become more formal and the selection process more concrete?

RY: (Pause) Towards the. . . I can't really think of the year, but it was in the late seventies. We really formalized it in the eighties, when we printed---you know, we

had some printed acquisition awards. But in the earlier days, like when I first started, I would have to type up these little cards that said "Acquisition Award, state foundation" on it that we would take along. And then whatever we purchased, we'd give to the sponsors of the show to put up. It had a gold seal on it. Now we have a real nicely printed one with the state seal on it. So I would say it was formalized probably about '78—'77, '78. And because of the audit, we had been working on some procedures and guidelines that spelled out the composition of those committees and how it would be set up. Because Mr. Preis was doing so many different things, it was real difficult to formalize that activity. And it was given to me as my responsibility right around the time that we kind of formalized it.

JR: Now, people can apply to be on this panel? Is that the way it works now?

RY: Right. Well yeah, in the early days it was like we wanted to avoid just letting anybody be a member of the committee, because some legislator would call up and say, "Hey, my wife wants to be on the committee," or some department head or something like that. Because they like art, or for whatever reason, they felt they should have some input. And we felt like we want people who have serious training or are in the business and are pursuing it as a career, not as like a hobby. So we put together a form so that we would be able to ask applicants what their background was. Basically, there was a need for us to utilize the best available people, simply because we wanted to maintain the integrity and the quality of the collection at a very high level.

JR: How many people sit on this panel now?

RY: Oh, it's not a panel. It's like we just have a lot of applicants that we call a pool. And (now) our curator, Lisa Yoshihara, will put together the committee based on what show they're going to review and what kind of expertise the consultants have, and being careful to avoid people who have a potential conflict. Like we don't want UH professors to be reviewing work by other UH professors or that sort of thing.

JR: Does the executive director or any of the board members—do they accompany this group to shows or things like that?

RY: Yes. The formal makeup of the committee includes the executive director, the Art in Public Places Committee of the board, staff—primarily it's Lisa Yoshihara—and the consultants. There's a slight problem now with the board members. Well, there's eight board members on the present Art in Public Places Committee. There's nine total members on the board. And we only call about two or three consultants, whose input I, as professional staff, value most highly. And it's getting to be like discouraging because of the fact that board members are sometimes outvoting the consultants or turning down the consultants' recommendations. But you know that—I've told you before that it's an area that is of great concern to the permanent staff at least. We're hoping that the board will recognize that in order to maintain a good, quality collection, you need to rely on people who are professionals in the business of visual arts. It's not just because it's your

responsibility as a board member, it's more like, what is fine art? What is public art? And I think over the years we have acquired a first-rate collection. And I just hope that we can continue to utilize professionals in the visual arts as our consultants who would be more responsible for making the decisions as far as selections go.

END OF SIDE TWO

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JR: When you were hired, were you working exclusively with the relocatable works?

RY: Yeah, in the beginning. . . . Well, let me think. Well, for the first several months, you know, trying to get our inventory back in shape. And then the legislature started, so we had to do a distribution there. But it was like I was the only guy. And I believe there were---well, there were a lot of commissioned projects going on, so after a while I started having to pick up and do some of the paperwork on the commissioned projects. Eventually, I think it was in 1977 or '78, we were authorized to hire for the state art curator position, which essentially was the position that would be in charge of the commissioned projects. But the person who was hired first lasted probably five months. And then the second person lasted maybe five months. And during those months they were just really in the learning process. So actually, by then I knew pretty much, so I was kind of trying to (help Mr. Preis) teach them what they were supposed to be doing. So yeah, I guess I was involved with commissions very early on, probably within the first year of my starting.

JR: The portable works were in disarray, if you will—you know, we talked about the audit, and the lack of staff, and things like that. Were the commissions in a similar circumstance?

RY: Well, the commissions had what we call advisory committees, made up of the building occupants and community members. It was very difficult, I imagine, for Mr. Preis to manage all of those projects, because there were so many of them and there was such a . . . Well, let me put it this way, it was like he was inventing this whole new process, the rules of the game for the business that we call public art, and all the while having to deal with public funds and listen to the criticisms that naturally will arise. (And don't forget, we also had a very large grants program covering all the other art forms.) One of the prohibitive factors at that time that I know of was that the monies could only be used to acquire art. So if he had a project going on on a neighbor island, he couldn't use the money to fly to that neighbor island to oversee the project. You know, it's kind of strange. But he did manage to accomplish quite a bit. (In the) eight years before I started they completed well over a hundred projects, and some of them (were) more successful than others.

JR: In terms of the legislators, over the years you've, you know, had a lot of contact with them. That first year, were you asked to do any lobbying or accompany Preis to the legislature?

RY: Well, no. I didn't do any lobbying. Of course, Mr. Preis was the person who was the spokesperson for our board, and he did all of the testimony. I don't know if you could call it lobbying, but because we distribute artwork to the legislators at the beginning of the session, I got to meet almost every one of them. And it's like a time to basically try to win them over, not with any facts and figures or anything, but just by showing them what we have and trying to explain the educational nature of the program and the opportunities the state had to influence the lives of the general public by displaying the collection in state offices. Otherwise, I went and attended some hearings.

JR: How does it work with the legislators? They get first dibs on artworks or . . .

RY: In those days, the deal was that the first place that we would exhibit new acquisitions was in the lieutenant governor's office, which is in the state capitol. Interested parties could go there and reserve the works that they wanted. So, of course, the legislators are in the capitol. Every time we installed a new show, which was every four to six months, it was a pretty exciting time for them, 'cause they would come down and start making their choices. Of course, at the beginning of each legislature we would try to call back all of the works that were on display in their offices and redistribute them. But after a while it got to the point where, if they became attached to a painting or a piece and they didn't want to give it up, they weren't going to give it up. So we kind of let it slide and figured that it's in our better interest to keep them happy.

JR: So every portable work would first be shown in the lieutenant governor's office at that time?

RY: Yeah, right. In those days, we used to display them salon style, you know, just stacked, and get in as many pieces as we could for the purpose of distributing them. Of course, we wanted to make the display aesthetically pleasing, so we took great care in designing the shows within our limitations. But the main objective was to put in a lot of pieces so that people could view them. And naturally they would be able to determine how good a job we were doing in terms of selecting art for the state collection, and they could find out which artists were being purchased. I think it was a good way to encourage appreciation for our artists. We used to have receptions every time we put on a new show, depending on who the lieutenant governor was. But the main thing was that was the first place that the works would be shown before they were dispersed into the community.

JR: Over the years, the Art in Public Places has been—let me put it this way, it's been an easy target for legislators who want to cut funds, let's say, from the SFCA or want to limit the SFCA's authority in some way. How did you react to those kind of threats, and were there any near misses? Or was the program ever endangered in your eyes?

RY: Not really. I mean, I don't want to sound flippant about it, but I felt like those legislators that were making the most noise were in the small minority, and that we had very strong support for the foundation over the years. A lot of the concern over the auditor's report was. . . . Well, it was easy for us to explain. The shortcomings were due to lack of staff and lack of funds, and limitations that were on our operational methods. So we were quite fortunate, I think, to have strong support from a good majority.

JR: Who were some of your stronger allies at the legislature?

RY: (Pause) From the beginning?

JR: It's up to you.

RY: Okay. Gee, just to run down a whole list. . . .

JR: Well, you don't have to name every last one of them.

RY: (Laughs) Okay.

JR: I'm more curious to find out who really supported what the SFCA was doing and, in the face of these kinds of threats to your programs, would stand up and say, "Hey, you know, what these people are doing is good." I was curious to find out if there were a few who were always supportive.

RY: Well, from the beginning, from when I first started---you know, you always have to look at the chairman of the subject matter committee, the Culture and Arts Committee, and it was Richard Ho, Neil Abercrombie, Calvin Say. On the house side, Brian Taniguchi has been real supportive since he's been in. David Hagino has been one of our greatest supporters over the years. Charlie Toguchi, both in the house and senate side. Eloise Tungpalan, she's the current chairman on the senate side. Let's see. . . . Mazie Hirono, Tom Okamura. Carol Fukunaga has been one of our great supporters. Karen Horita. You know, I could go on and on. But there's just so many of them, and I would hate to forget one of them either. But I would say that the chairs of the (subject matter and money) committees have generally been really supportive, especially after they found out what it is we were all about. Even Ben Cayetano was great.

JR: In '79, I believe it was, the SFCA limited its acquisitions. And it may have been---I'm not too sure, but it may have been as a result of a house resolution or something like that. Do you have any recollection of that time and what the reduction was supposed to achieve?

RY: Yeah, I believe that there was a concern among the house members that works of art weren't being circulated enough throughout the state and that we needed time---or we needed to focus our staff energies on resolving that problem. So yeah, there was a real big slowdown in acquisitions. Of course, it was like the major problem was that, in order to distribute the works, we needed a reliable crew that

would actually be traveling statewide to do the installations and to do the retrievals. And we did not really make too many gains on that portion until more recently.

The bottom line was that, to begin with, you need a trained, professional staff to be able to properly handle the works so that you can transport it from place to place. And we were using students, graduate students in fine arts from the university, for a noble purpose really, to give them experience and training in this visual arts business. But they were part-time workers on contracts, and their class or school schedule is more important than picking up a few dollars. So we were quite limited in the number of installations we could do and used moving companies a lot to get the works transported from one place to another. We would try to be as cost effective as we could be by doing major installations. For example, we did a distribution here at the university probably around late seventies, early eighties, and tried to distribute as much as we could to as many different public spaces as we could within about a one month period or less. That was pretty successful.

But our downfall was that we didn't have full-time staff, we didn't have a space, a distribution site where we could assemble the works, pack them up, store them, and receive them. It's like we were working in the hallways. And it was really difficult to do—or to keep these distributions going on a consistent basis when there were so many other things to be done. I mean, especially like in '79, of course, there was only me in the program. So I was, by that time, assisting Mr. Preis on the commissions, trying to get those things—the contracts and everything—and still trying to do the distributions, still being involved in the acquisitions, doing maintenance and repair, that kind of stuff, as well as worrying about all of the criticism we'd be getting and trying to defend ourselves and maintain the law. So it's. . . . Well, it was a big challenge, (chuckles) an opportunity to show the legislators as well as the public what the program was all about.

But it was real difficult times because of all the criticism taking up so much of our time. That's the worst part, I think. I mean, if we were given the resources and allowed to do what we (thought) needed to be done at that time, I think that our program would be fully functional by now. But it's just one thing after another. And with a small staff it's almost impossible to be able to accomplish what needs to be accomplished, not to say we haven't accomplished a lot, though.

Now (thanks to state comptroller Russel Nagata) we have a distribution facility which (will provide an excellent base for operations once it's fully functional). We're in the process of acquiring our own van. We're authorized to request (chuckles) positions with the new law, but it'll be several years, I think, before that's realized. In the meanwhile, we're contracting help and trying to get their salaries up to the point where it's attractive, to the point where we can get full-time professional help. So we've made a lot of great strides over the years.

But in '79, the simplistic approach was stop doing this so you can do that. And that was not that easy to do. To do that, you got to do tons of other things. It's just like

trying to treat a cancer victim for a cut on his finger or something. Or put a Band-Aid on a gash. It's like the guy's going to bleed to death before you save him. But it was, I think, a well-intentioned attempt by the legislature to resolve our problems. But it's just---you know, realistically that's not how it is. You got several things to do—or dozens of things to do—and only time enough to do one at a time. So we plod along. And like, what, eleven years later we're starting to scratch the surface. But that's the way it goes.

JR: There was one other legal thing that I wanted to mention, then we can move on to other areas. But I know that—it was in the audit also—that there was controversy for a number of years about whether or not the SFCA had the authority to use monies from building A, that were generated in the construction or renovation of building A, to put artworks in buildings, say, B and C and D and things like. . . . And you have that ability now.

RY: Right.

JR: But you always haven't had it.

RY: Well . . .

JR: Do you remember when that change came about or any of the details there?

RY: Yeah, there was a devastating opinion issued by the attorney general's office—I think dated June 24, 1975, which was before my time. But it impacted us a lot because it limited us to do projects only where there was—and I'm talking about permanent, commissioned works of art—only where there was an active appropriation. Now, this is a really complex matter, but I'll try to explain it as simply as I can.

If, for example, the new stadium, Aloha Stadium, generates, say, \$200,000 in 1 percent for art money. And [if] the money is appropriated in 1974, the appropriation lapses in 1976. So by 1976, on June 30, you have to have declared where you're going to do an art project with that money. You can take the money and transfer it to a project, for example, at the new art building, which was built around the same time, on the university campus, as long as the art building had an appropriation that was made in '74 and wouldn't lapse until 1976 also. If June 30 passes—'76—and you haven't transferred the money from the stadium building, you could only do a project at the stadium, okay. If you transfer it and declare that you're going to do a project at the art building before then, then you can do a project there. But you're just basically limited to do a project in that one particular space. That forced us to zero in on projects where---well, I think I'm getting ahead of myself. Joe, this---I might have to start all over. It's kind of screwed up.

(I think what you were referring to was the fact that the SFCA was doing commissioned projects for "old" buildings which had no construction appropriations. That happened up until the attorney general's opinion was issued. In fact, the first series of commissions was done for the state office buildings on each island. This

was done because Mr. Preis and the board felt that state office buildings were the most important buildings—the flagships, so to speak—and they wanted to make a statement by putting artworks at the most important buildings. They also targeted community colleges and the state libraries as high-priority sites early on and commissioned projects for those types of buildings before the attorney general's opinion shut it down.)

Well, let me just say this. The fact was that in tracking the 1 percent funds, or keeping track of them, we had to go over to the public works division in DAGS [Department of Accounting and General Services] and find out what the status of the funds were. In other words, if the building wasn't under construction, it wasn't available to us. If, for example, June 30, 1976, passed and they didn't build (the) building, the money was lapsed. We couldn't use it.

JR: Well, I think what I'm trying to find out is—at some point you were given the authority to use funding from building A to put artworks in other structures, aside from that particular building . . .

RY: I think that was always possible.

JR: Okay. Because I know that in the audit they said that the monies were sometimes used illegally to do that and things like this. And it wasn't until an attorney general's opinion came down saying that you could, in fact . . .

RY: Yeah, okay. Let me back up. That June '75 opinion was issued actually at the comptroller's request to clarify how we could use the money, and it would set a—more or less a deadline on its use. There was, more or less, always the opportunity to transfer funds between state buildings. Yeah, as far as I can recall.

JR: It sounds like the SFCA did it anyway, whether or not . . .

RY: Yeah. Well, you . . .

JR: I think maybe it was frowned upon by some people at certain periods because of that decision or because of other things. But in looking back, it seems that it was done anyway.

RY: Well, what you need to understand is that the 1 percent law was written by Alfred Preis, you know, and he knew the intent, obviously. He took great pains in putting it together so that it would accomplish the purposes that he set out, and that was, basically, to provide a funding source for acquiring arts for the state. He had no intention that it was limited to use in this building or that building or anything like that. It's just that that's how it ended up once the attorney general's people got involved. But he told me that his intention was to provide a pool of funds that could be used for all purposes, very much consistent with what we have, with the law as it stands now, which was revised in 1989. By then, the legislators who sponsored it knew what the intent was.

JR: I know that now you have visits to different artists', master artists', workshops and studios to purchase works for large sums of money. Does that money come from 1 percent funds?

RY: Yeah. Well, all of our funds---all of our acquisitions are funded through the 1 percent appropriations.

JR: How does that work, the . . .

RY: Studio visits?

JR: Yeah. And what's the thinking behind . . .

RY: Well, the intent of the program has always been to acquire the very best works available from whatever sources. And aside from open-juried shows (and) commercial gallery exhibits, the best way to look at a large body of top-quality work is to go directly to an artist's studio. It happened early on, from time to time, and kind of fizzled out, because there is a lot of politics involved in selecting one artist over another. And the fact is that we couldn't really tell artists, "You can't request that we come for studio visits," so we were getting requests that we go and going to some and not going to others. But the one procedure we set up was that a studio visit had to be pre-approved by our board, based on the artist's past accomplishments and a review of their past works, so that we could ensure that we weren't wasting our time.

Now this---you know, that's kind of judgmental when you think about it. But most recently we put together a committee of some of our most highly respected arts professionals and asked them to go over a list of probably about fifty or sixty artists to determine which ones we might make studio visits to. And at that time I was looking for a way to open up the acquisition program, because last year the law was changed. And now with the establishment of a special fund and the addition of getting 1 percent off renovation of buildings, we anticipate a great increase in our funding. So we were looking for ways to spread it out and acquire more works. And so we put together this committee and originally asked them to consider both emerging artists and master artists. Well, the question of what is an emerging artist came up. And it's a tough question to answer. (Personally, I think of it as "emerging" on a national level.) But anyway, the committee---which included our some of our board members, there was about ten people---eventually decided that we would only recommend master artists for studio visits.

And the thinking behind going on studio visits most recently has been the fact that the state is unable to give fellowships to individual artists or any kind of individuals. And we wanted to reward artists for their efforts over a long-term period and give them the recognition that they deserve. We came up with, you know, the concept that we would attempt to spend a certain amount of money. (My) target was \$25,000 or in that ballpark, depending on what kind of work the artist does.

Well, the committee eventually recommended ten artists statewide. And we're entering a new era in studio visits, 'cause I think these artists who were selected and approved by our board are deserving of the recognition and certainly worthy of whatever kind of monetary gains they can get out of it. One thing, though, is that the state demands that the artworks that we get in return are of equal value to the funds that we expend. So it's going to be interesting to see how it goes as we do the visits.

We have completed one so far, and that was to Bumpei Akaji's studio a couple of months ago. And I thought that that was really successful. We were able to see just a really wide range of his work, from the early fifties up to the present. And it was like a retrospective show in his studio, you know, something that I think was valuable to every one of us who was fortunate enough to go there and see what he had done over the years. It's like you're not going to see that kind of volume in a gallery show. And when we go to open-juried shows, you see one or two works by an artist. You go to a one-person show, it's usually work over the last year or so. I mean, retrospective shows are done rather infrequently. And to think that we're going to be doing nine more is really exciting to our staff. And I think that we came away from Bumpei's studio with six pieces that are just fantastic, wonderful pieces.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

JR: How has it been working with all the different artists that you've had to work with in the SFCA?

RY: Oh, I find it real enjoyable. I love to work with artists. I think you hear about crazy artists and like that, and starving artists—and there are crazy and starving [artists]—but for the most part, they're the most down-to-earth, sensitive people around, very honest. (They are the seers of the future and the conscience of society.) And I feel like I've been really fortunate to be able to work with as many as I have. I mean, I probably know most of the artists, or at least who they are, and have worked with, through the commissions program, many of the top artists.

JR: Do you have to follow---since you're a state agency, do you have to follow any special kind of ethical guidelines, since you're actually purchasing works from artists?

RY: Ethical guidelines? I'm not sure what you mean by that. I'm not married to an artist. (Laughs) What do you mean?

JR: Well. . . . Say, for instance, artists contacting you, "I want you to come to this show." Or do artists solicit on their own behalf?

And do you have set procedures, you know, like, "I'm sorry, I can't . . ."

RY: As far as going to shows, you mean to purchase stuff?

JR: Yeah.

RY: Okay. The thing now is that we've kind of refined it to the point where we ask galleries and sponsoring organizations for annual schedules so that we would know in advance what's going on. We normally wouldn't go unless we're invited, but everybody invites us, so that's not any factor, really. The bottom line is we're after utilizing the time of the people who are involved (with selections) in the most efficient way that we can, and so we don't want to go to shows that, in our professional judgment, would be a waste of time. Now, it's really difficult to determine that, and there's always going to be an opposite opinion, especially from the guys (to whom) we're saying we're not going to go.

But we've come up with some general policies or guidelines, and those are that mainly we'd like to go to open-juried shows, where the widest possible range of artists would be at least allowed to enter the show (and the work has been screened for quality by a professional). These are juried shows like the [Honolulu] Academy of Arts' annual Artists of Hawai'i show, the Hawai'i Craftsmen annual show. There are any number of open-juried shows that we would at least consider.

Then there are gallery exhibits, which we favor. I don't know if I should say "favor," but we always consider our two foremost institutions—the [Honolulu] Academy of Arts and The Contemporary Museum—because we know they have professional staff, curators and exhibition directors who are being careful about who it is that are being shown. Of course, one of the comments has always been that you really have to be established to be allowed a show in there. But in the case of The Contemporary Museum, they have really always kind of been real innovative. They allow master's degrees candidates to have thesis shows there in the news building and have come up with ways to enable younger, aspiring artists to show their work, to get them on exhibit.

We go to local galleries. The ones we favor are those that have a track record, really, on showing local professional artists' works. And, you know, we've even gone to restaurants in the past where they're showing art on their walls, which—I don't think it's been unsuccessful. But what we're after---given the limit to the amount of time we have and the limited number of acquisition outings we go on, what we're really after is work by professional artists, artists who—they are pursuing it as a career, not as a hobby.

I think we've set up a network of where, through experience, our curator, Lisa [Yoshihara], has been able to determine which shows would be worthwhile going to. Otherwise, you know, if we responded to every invitation we had, it would be, I think, detrimental to the program. I think we would not buy every time we went out, which would cause artists to become disappointed or embarrassed or upset that we didn't buy their work. But we're trying to maintain the integrity of our

collection, so we've got to make these hard decisions. And the thing that I like to stress is that we take it seriously as professional staff. It's not like we're going to flip a coin. We want to make sure that we give every consideration to whichever gallery is having an exhibit. So a lot of serious thought is put into which shows are reviewed. It's getting kind of cumbersome, but I think the quality of the collection over the years just proves that we're on the right track, we have been on the right track over the years, and that we've been getting the best works available in the state.

JR: How do you balance the purchases of local artists with those of international artists?

RY: Well, there's no conscious attempt being made to buy one international for every eighty local that we buy. It really depends on what is scheduled by the arts organizations or institutions. We have no control over that, and so we are just responding to just what's out there. I think probably the collection is more than 95 percent local, if you start talking statistics. But we've always felt—and this is another philosophy from Alfred Preis—that in order for our artists to achieve greater heights (and to educate people), they need to see examples of art that is considered to be, on an international level, great work. So we try to acquire works, if we can afford it nowadays, of those international stars or superstars or any out-of-state artist who is fortunate enough to exhibit work here.

The same goes for the commissioning program, although we've done less of those. The real major pieces of the collection are by out-of-state artists. And that is just because of budgets and things like that, because, undoubtedly, out-of-state artists will require more money, just to travel and to live here and to ship stuff back and forth. But not only that—because the pricing of art is such a mysterious thing. Basically, the more famous you are, the more you can get. And it's not based on how much your materials cost. I mean, when paintings can go in six figures and the materials are like in two figures, it doesn't take a genius to figure out that somebody is scoring a lot of bucks. So we have picked up whatever work by out-of-state artists that comes our way that is judged by our acquisition committees to be worthy of accession into our collection.

JR: I'm going to ask you a broad question now, but I'd like to get your answer. What's the purpose of the collection?

RY: Well, the primary purpose is to provide an educational tool for the people of Hawai'i. It is to expose people or introduce people to visual arts, wherever they might have to do business with the state. It is a museum without walls. And the concept (is) that when people have to go down to pay their taxes at the tax office, or go to get a license, or go to school, there would be works of art that they could not avoid seeing. And it's like a forced educational process. By exposing people to a wide variety of visual arts styles and forms and techniques, we are hoping to give the public a general education and help them grow spiritually.

JR: Is the collection ever viewed as an investment? You were talking earlier about the

sums artworks are getting now. A lot of people are buying them for that amount of money because they figure it's a sound investment.

RY: Well, in terms of investment, we are not acquiring art as an investment. Investment would lead you to think that you're going to turn around and sell it someday at a profit, hopefully. And the fact is that Alfred Preis had told me early on, "We (will probably) wear out these things by displaying them statewide, by just physically moving them from place to place." And you're not going to realize a return on your investment unless you keep the artwork in pristine condition, which means you're going to put it in a box and store it away. So by no means are we looking at it as [an investment]. Realistically, though, the works that we have that are of importance have appreciated in value and will continue to appreciate, even though we have no intention of selling them in the future. I think those works that would give you a profit if you were to sell them are the very ones that you don't want to sell, because they become such an important part of (Hawaii's cultural history, of) the environment, in the case of commissioned works, and for our portable works, it's just as important to have examples of paintings and prints and that kind of stuff that is of top quality.

It gets kind of touchy when you realize that a thirty-six-inch square painting is worth over a \$100,000. It's like it kind of stops you from displaying it in any old public space. Then you start worrying about theft and vandalism. So we have a great deal of thinking to do in those areas. It's like we have some buildings that have good security in the state, and the really valuable works tend to end up in those sites. But for the most part, the intention is for this collection to be a (rotating) people's collection, so that anybody off the street can walk in and see something, and you don't have to go to a museum, because not everybody is into going to museums. And we certainly want people to have good aesthetic experiences here, rather than having to go to the Mainland to see a [Alexander] Liberman [sculpture] or a Tony Smith [sculpture] or something like that. It's like that's part of the concept behind placing these things where they are accessible to the public.

JR: Are the works insured?

RY: No. (Chuckles) They're insured while they're in transit, if we're shipping them or that type of stuff. But otherwise, the state's policy (is) that everything is self-insured. In other words---in fact, our stuff is listed as furniture in the state inventory. So it's like, you break a chair, you buy a new chair. I guess no one really took any pains to figure out what happens if a priceless work of art gets broken or destroyed. It's something that is of concern to us. The fact is that an insurance premium on our collection would be prohibitive. Our collection is worth many million dollars. So all we can do is try to, well, make sure that they're insured while they're in transit or on loan and exhibit them in spaces that are supervised and secured.

JR: How large is the collection right now, just a guess?

RY: My guess would be that there are between 4,000 and 4,500 relocatable works and about 300 permanent, commissioned works.

JR: The relocatable works, are those evenly divided between ceramics and paintings and photography, or is there an abundance of paintings, say?

RY: Well, there's a lot of paintings and prints, a lot of photography. Ceramics and sculpture, being three-dimensional works, there's somewhat less of those, because when you try to display them, it takes a different setting. Everybody has this big blank space on the wall that they want to cover up, but nobody has room on their floor for a pedestal. It just would get in the way. So I think it's reflected in our collection. The other thing is that we commission mostly sculptures. We probably will---as we go along and are able to integrate the artworks with the architecture, which has been one of our major goals for a long time, we'll probably see more wall-mounted pieces. But because of the way the law was up until '89, we weren't able to effectively plan for the installation of arts in all cases. So we ended up, after the building had already been designed, going in and trying to figure out where we could place art. And rather than slap it on the end of the wall or wherever, which looks terrible, we would opt for placing a sculpture somewhere.

JR: What about the maintenance of the works? A lot of them are getting old.

RY: Yeah, a lot of them are almost dead now. A lot of them have deteriorated, and maintenance has been a major concern of our board for the last several years now. It got to the point where it became a concern of our legislature (so they gave us a staff position to deal with the problem). And around August '88 we hired a permanent (professional) to be in charge of maintenance and repairs. His name is Jon Johnson. Since then, Jon has embarked on this survey, primarily of the commissioned works, (to determine their condition, treatment requirements, and maintenance schedules). The R and M [i.e., repair and maintenance] on relocatable works is an ongoing thing. When we move stuff around, Lisa gets to see them. If it needs a new frame or a new mat, that's simple enough for her to take care of.

For the commissioned works, which are permanent, it has usually been a reactive kind of a thing. You know, if somebody calls us up and tells us, "Hey, this thing is rusted or broken," then we would respond. But now with Jon aboard, we've been contracting with the Pacific Regional Conservation Center and some other conservation types to survey or inspect all of the commissioned works systematically and prepare condition reports and treatment proposals. And then we're looking at what's coming in, and when there's an urgent need to act, we contract for the repairs. Otherwise, we're waiting to see what the overall survey will tell us, and we'll try to determine our priorities based on the conservationists' recommendations, availability of funds, and that kind of considerations.

So repairs and maintenance is finally getting the attention it needs. In fact---this is an aside---last week we reported to our board---and we call it upkeep services, because the law says, "For the transportation and upkeep of works of art." We didn't want to mess with that, but we finally asked the board if we could change

the name to conservation services for our program, to make it sound . . .

JR: Sounds a little more impressive . . .

RY: Yeah. Upkeep, give me a break.

JR: Well, you used a polite term for disposal.

RY: Oh, a deaccession?

JR: Yeah.

RY: (Chuckles) Well, that's the lingo of us art bureaucrats. You don't want to say, "Trash the sucker."

JR: How does that work?

RY: Well, deaccession is simply taking it off the inventory. In our case, we don't have a method (for getting rid of works that still have a useful life). And we've resisted attempts to get us to set up a policy for auctioning off artworks. Another Alfred Preis philosophy that I adhere to is that if you're going to auction pieces off, first of all, you know, you're not going to auction off the good stuff. So it's kind of insulting and humiliating actually to the artist whose work you're getting rid of, because you're saying that it's no longer worthy of being in the collection or—it's like it becomes a negative thing.

Anyway, there are a lot of people who think that we should auction them off. And one question is, well, who's going to determine what should be auctioned off? And how are you going to work that auction? And where are the funds going to go? Because first of all, the state doesn't usually sell stuff. But if we were to get income, it's like it's going to go back into the general fund unless they change the law so that we could set up a revolving fund for that kind of stuff. But that is just probably an administrative problem that could be worked out. But my main concern would be about what you're saying about the artists' work that you are getting rid of. And I still can't see why the state would acquire something that's good, only to turn around and sell it. It's like that's not the business we're in.

But to get back to deaccession, the main thing is it's an inventory procedure that is standard with all departments. It's run by DAGS. And we deaccession works that have been broken or stolen or lost. Lost is not a problem. We don't lose works. But there have been some that disappear, and nobody can account for where it went. So we chalk it up—we get a police report and chalk it up to theft. But the other reason would be if it just is damaged or broken beyond repair. And we do consult with the artist to find out if it can be repaired, if the artist would be interested in repairing it. If it's beyond restoration, we dispose of it through the inventory procedures. In those cases, we destroy the work so that it can't be recycled.

There was a question recently, at one of our committee meetings, asking if we

return the piece to an artist because they might want it back. And I'm going, "We bought it." And it's like if we give it back to them, and they decide to recycle it and sell again to somebody, that's just not cool. Anyway, there's a set procedure, so we just follow that.

JR: We've talked about the legislature and the board and the executive director and things like that, but we haven't talked about the public, the average taxpayer. Have you had to respond to complaints from people who don't like a particular work of art or feel the state's wasting their money?

RY: Yeah. Of course, you're going to have complaints over things in the arts because people have different tastes, that's why. There's different styles of clothes, cars, and whatever. It's like consumers have their own opinions about whatever, and people are going to complain if they see something they don't like. Usually it's related to something that an individual finds repulsive or foreign or something that—usually it's abstract art, work that doesn't have an explicit message or a message that is readily definable or detectable. We have had complaints about nudes. And it's just---that's the way it goes. People are going to complain. And I chalk it up as that individual person's upbringing and lack of tolerance to new experiences. Fred Preis used to say that when you show someone something that is alien to him, he will react with rejection or by rejecting that piece. And some people get emotional, some people get violent or physical or whatever, but it's their way of dealing with this alienation that they feel.

So that's why our program is based on educating the public on the different styles and techniques and that kind of stuff, so that the next time John Q. Public walks down the street and sees something that is strange to him, he will stop to think a little about what the message is or how the thing is affecting him, rather than freaking out and throwing a rock at it or something. I think we've made some strides, but people are people and we're not going to affect every one of them. So we're just striving to educate the majority and build up this understanding that visual arts is about expression, human expression, in tangible materials. And if they walk by it, it ain't successful. It's got to say something to somebody. I mean, that's what a successful piece does, it has a message. And not everybody's going to get a message. It's like music, some guys like rock 'n roll, some guys like reggae, some guys like classical. If you are able to tolerate or appreciate a wide range or a wide variety of different kinds of music, I think you're a better-rounded person. And same with visual arts. I mean, it doesn't take a well-rounded person to appreciate a placid landscape scene. Not to denigrate that kind of stuff, but it's about—expression is what it's all about. And we're trying to round people out.

JR: When you were hired, you didn't have that much awareness of what the SFCA did. How do you feel about the people out there today, same thing?

RY: Well, yeah. It's like you said [in a previous conversation], we don't get a lot of publicity unless it's negative. I think we have tried over the last ten years or so to enhance our image and to publicize the fact that we sponsor a lot of (culture and arts) programs (and activities). We've gone after that a little bit more vigorously,

but for the most part we're trying to nurture and encourage stuff. And it's not a real flashy kind of glitzy scene we're into. We're not Hollywood. We're trying to be low key and really—I think we have had like a subliminal effect on people. People, I think, today are more aware of arts and culture and that kind of stuff.

For example, not in visual arts, but the Hawaiian renaissance, which started in the (early) seventies, was really—I don't know if Alfred Preis told you this—a calculated effort undertaken by the SFCA (to) support Hawaiians and the Hawaiian culture (by) promoting programs, providing money to enable masters to pass on their knowledge and that kind of stuff. It was all well thought out and a result of that Governor's Conference [on Culture and the Arts] way back in the sixties somewhere [1966].

JR: I got to stop to turn the tape.

END OF SIDE TWO

TAPE NO. 20-25-1-90; SIDE ONE

JR: Speaking of the Hawaiian renaissance, when the eighties rolled around, the SFCA was criticized for not having supported the Hawaiian arts enough. Whether those criticisms were valid or not, I don't know at this point, but regardless, I wanted to get your thoughts on support for indigenous arts—Hawaiian arts—and other ethnic arts that traditional painting and sculpture don't encompass.

RY: Okay. First of all, the original intent, as Alfred Preis had told me, of the (Art in Public Places) program was to support contemporary arts. So, you know, if you look at the work that was acquired from the earliest time, like in 1968, you'll see where they were really going after contemporary stuff, because (the SFCA was) trying especially hard at that time to break down the mystique of contemporary arts. Too many local people were, I guess, confused about the intentions or meaning of all this weird stuff that was supposed to be great. (Plus, a lot of people thought that fine arts was only for the rich.) And along with his philosophy of art being for the public, Alfred Preis told me that they wanted, again, to expose people so that they were confronted by this art. And hopefully, if they would read an explanation of it, which would be an integral part of the display, it would enable them to walk away with a little bit more comfort, being more comfortable with themselves and their own ability to grasp or to get it. Because people, when they see something they don't understand they scratch their head and they go, "What the hell is that?" And then you get the comment, "My kid could have done that. A gorilla could have done that."

I think. . . . Well, they did it purposely. It was like there was a need at that time to acquire works for the state collection that would enable the program to display works so that people would just become more aware and more understanding of what it is the contemporary artists were doing. I mean, it was really strange to a

lot of people.

But on the other hand, there was the mission of the foundation to support Hawaiian culture and arts. And one thing that we realized was that, okay, we don't want to buy reproductions or copies, because that's not (providing support to creative artists and craftsmen). So we wanted to buy original artworks. And because of the tourist industry and the market for objects that could be mass-produced, you see a lot of these carvings, which aren't really Hawaiian carvings, or tikis and that kind of stuff in those days being mass-produced and sold in the tourist market. That's not the kind of stuff we wanted. On the other hand, the real objects that were authentic were priced, you know, in like six figures. You couldn't get the real stuff because they were all in private collections or in museums (on the Mainland or in Europe).

And so the only thing left was to look at the work of those Hawaiian artists who were producing works that were contemporary and yet had the spirit of Hawai'i or, I guess, were along the veins of the old style but in a new way and new methods and like that. And we have supported that over the years. In fact, we have acquired a lot of wooden bowls and carved forms, which some hard-core museum types would call reproductions. But we've tried to, like I said, present a wide variety of objects to the public so that they will get this education without having to go to the Bishop Museum or the academy of arts or, you know, somewhere on the Mainland where they have all these really famous things that you only see in books.

So it's been evolving over the years. And we still don't know what direction it'll take, because the fact is, I feel like we still don't want to buy reproductions. Of course, you know, I'd love to acquire (more) Hawaiian quilts. Through our Folk Arts program a collection of feather leis (was) acquired, that kind of stuff. But we haven't really investigated that area that thoroughly. I know Lynn Martin [SFCA folk arts coordinator] would love for us to go after some of these folk art types of objects. But folk arts, it carries the implication that it's utilitarian and that, well, it's more of a crafty kind of a thing, which we don't frown on either. But there is a thing between arts and crafts that needs to be distinguished. We're just trying to make sure that whenever we do look at exhibits of work, no matter what they might be, that they meet our criteria in terms of creativity, as well as our standards for technique and the workmanship that we want to maintain at a high level.

So as far as Hawaiian folk arts types of things, or even works by other ethnic groups, because our focus has been on contemporary arts—and also because groups or organizations have not sponsored exhibitions. Usually people who do folk arts types of things, or make grass slippers or that kind of stuff, they're hard to find. I think Lynn Martin has done a wonderful job in getting these people out of the woodwork. But exhibitions of that nature are just not happening. Organizations are not sponsoring those types of things. So consequently, we don't have an avenue to go and review the work with one of our (acquisition) committees. We're kind of in a bind in trying to figure out how we're going to acquire those types of objects. I

think there will be the day when we're able to pursue it with more of a focus or with a greater number of our resources, but right now we're still kind of struggling along, trying to regroup with this new law coming into effect. There's so much excitement over the distribution facility and our van and that kind of stuff. I mean, twenty-three years after the law, we're finally getting the means to distribute our stuff properly, right? So it's like we'll get there, I'm sure, but . . .

JR: Taking a while?

RY: Yeah, everything takes one step at a time.

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

JR: From hearing you talk, it sounds like the program has been hamstrung, in a sense, due to lack of staff and facilities and even transportation. I think that it's been true of the SFCA to a certain regard also. Do you think that the critics of the SFCA in the eighties, when they were criticizing the SFCA, understood that?

RY: No, I don't think people in general realized what kind of limitations we had and still have, because it's not something you're going to talk about. You can't brag about something that you're frustrated with. And you don't want to complain about it, because you're just so caught up in doing what you can do. But it's been real frustrating to have the kind of responsibilities we have and just lack the resources that we know would help resolve the problems. I don't know what else to say about that. It's one of those areas where you want to focus—well, for me, I want to focus on progress and positive types of things, so I try to focus my attention or put my efforts and energies into things, areas that will produce results. Maybe that's not good, because when you neglect some problems, they multiply, they increase. But it's like you can only do so much at one time. And I feel that we've accomplished a lot, in spite of the obstacles. The failures are around us, that's the way life goes. You can't win them all.

JR: You've been with SFCA for a long time now. When the agency was coming under fire, a series of bad newspaper articles—or negative, I won't say bad—but newspaper articles critical of the agency hit the front page of the evening newspaper [*Honolulu Star-Bulletin*]. Internal conflicts became public, and things like this. What kind of an effect does that have on people who are working and trying to get their job done?

RY: Well, in some ways I think it had both positive and negative effects. In some ways, the fact that the problems were publicized were a relief to some of us who knew that the problems really existed and hampered our productivity. But in another sense, you don't need bad publicity. I mean, every time you look at the newspapers, it's about grief or death or taxes or something like that. And it's like it just focused on a negative thing, which I don't think is necessarily that good. But, like I said, it helped get the problems out in the open. And it caused the board members and the legislators to realize that we had serious problems that needed to be addressed and resolved. So, I guess, overall it was okay.

The board is the body that needs to realize that there is a permanent, professional staff whose business it is to carry out their policies. And we need their support, and we need them to be active in helping us with resources and that kind of stuff. That's what I think they should be concerned about, rather than (trying to get involved with) day-to-day operations. That's why we have an executive director and a staff, to carry out day-to-day operations. The board sets policy, and they should use their political influence to help us acquire the resources that are necessary. To me, that's real simple, you know.

JR: Sort of skipping around now. You worked under Preis and [Sarah] Richards. How would you compare the two?

RY: Well, Alfred Preis was a workaholic. I mean, he was just totally committed to the job and to the agency and to the state. He lived and breathed state foundation, and he had a sincere commitment to promoting its policies and accomplishing whatever he could in terms of nurturing and supporting culture and the arts statewide. The auditor's report was real critical in the administrative areas, and so Sarah, following Fred's retirement, was hired to give the foundation better administrative abilities. Her interests and her background were very different from Mr. Preis'. She was dean of students at Chaminade [College] and really interested in opera and the symphony. So (her job was to) carry out the policies of the board and hopefully ensure greater funding and that kind of stuff from the legislature.

And as far as working with them, Alfred Preis was very demanding. He had high standards and really, because he was so totally involved with the development or the establishment of the foundation, he wanted so dearly for everything to succeed. Sarah was an administrator, more trying to please everybody else. She was, to me, fairly easy to work with, just supportive of our program and everything else. She just had her own areas that she liked to be involved in, and visual arts was not something that she really got deeply involved with. I think she had a lot of confidence in (the Art in Public Places) staff and pretty much let us do what needed to be done. She didn't pretend to know what it took to run a public art program, and she pretty much delegated the work to us.

JR: Something we haven't gotten into yet is the national scene, other states having this kind of program. Hawai'i was the first . . .

RY: Right.

JR: . . . in the country to have this kind of program, but others have sprouted up. Were you in contact with people in similar positions in other states?

RY: Oh yes. Way back as far as 1977, there was a national meeting of—actually, at that time it was crafts coordinators, and we've been meeting off and on, more recently as visual arts coordinators or percent-for-art coordinators, at national meetings over the years. There have been several. And we've, since 1982, been trying to establish some kind of a visual arts coordinators consortium or group that could benefit by meeting and discussing the issues on a regular basis. It's been

about two or three years since we've met last, but overall, you know, there's a small group of people. The fact is that staff people in this business come and go so often. There's probably, nationwide, maybe (half a dozen) of us who've been around and who are pretty stable as far as representing one state arts agency. But it's a real transient group, and some people move around. And others have found the private market more lucrative, because public art has caught on, not only state but counties. And there has been legislation that affects the private sector in a lot of the cities. So where it's required that private developers set aside like 1 percent for art in their projects, there's big money to be made for people who are going to coordinate that type of work.

JR: Commissions and things like that.

RY: Yeah, 'cause it costs in the tens of millions or even the hundreds of millions now to put up big development projects. And 1 percent of a hundred million is a lot of money, a million dollars.

JR: How many other states have programs like the one in Hawai'i?

RY: At last count, I think there were like twenty-two states, I think. There's dozens of cities and counties, but as far states goes, I think it leveled off at around twenty-two.

JR: How does Hawai'i's Art in Public Places program and legislation differ from other states?

RY: Well, our original law really was a model for most of the other states that followed suit. The new law (Section 103-8.5, HRS) which was passed in '89 I think is too new for others to emulate or to copy. But I think those states that are more progressive will pick up on the fact that our law now is really beneficial to the arts. It's like it just eliminated so many of the stumbling blocks that we had previously.

JR: In a nutshell, what does the new law allow that the old law prohibited?

RY: Well, the new law established a special fund for works of art. It sets aside 1 percent from the construction of new buildings and the renovation of buildings. It also doesn't limit us in the placement of art projects. So in effect we're enabled to place our projects anywhere there is state property or a state building. Because it's a special fund, we're not faced with the lapsing of money. Once funds are deposited into the account, it just grows. It specifically allows us to spend the money on—aside from artwork—staff, educational features for our displays, transportation, and maintenance. That's about it. The main thing was the special fund thing, and no lapse, and the renovation 1 percent, which was fantastic. Because, you know, there's more old buildings now. And some of the historic state buildings have generated a lot of the money the past years, plus the DOE [Department of Education] and its renovations generates quite a bit.

JR: Can you give me a ballpark figure? About how much money a year are you dealing

with in both commissions and relocatable works?

RY: Well, at present, this fiscal year, our budget—see, it's like a transition year, so we have some money from the old funds and some money from the new funds. So from the new fund we've got, oh, \$700,000 to cover a lot of, well, both commissions, the relocatable stuff, our van, our computer, and that kind of stuff. And from the old funds we've got another \$700,000 or so. So we're talking about \$1-1/2 million.

JR: Would that be the type of money that would be generated on an average year, over a million dollars?

RY: Well, when the projections were made, when they were reviewing the law before its passage, the public works people came up with a figure in the neighborhood of \$3 million a year. So we were all—we were stoked.

JR: Do you remember how much money you were working with when you first joined the SFCA, just for comparison?

RY: Well, yeah. It was somewhere around maybe a 150,000 [dollars a year]. It was pretty small.

JR: Big difference.

RY: Yeah.

END OF SIDE

SIDE TWO

JR: In 1987 you put together a retrospective of the first twenty years of the Art in Public Places. There's an interesting story that goes along with the catalog and how it was financed. I was wondering if you could tell me about that?

RY: Okay. Well, to celebrate the anniversary, one of the easiest things, and something that had been done previously, was to put on an exhibit of works from the state collection. But we wanted to take it a step further this time, and instead of providing like a small, little program or list of works in the exhibit, we wanted to put together a catalog. It was something that we had been thinking about for several years. The idea was that we would attempt to commission the catalog, since it hadn't been done before, as a work of art in graphic design. The thing was that for any work that is biddable, you're supposed to bid it out and go with the cheapest, the lowest bid. In our case, with commissioned projects we had a waiver on that, because artwork is not something that you're going to cut corners on or that you would want to be done in the cheapest materials or allow substitutions to be made. So the idea was that we would commission a graphic designer and use 1 percent funds to commission the production of the catalog.

Anyway, being that it would be a statewide project, that we would distribute this catalog to all the state offices and agencies and all the legislators and all of that, we decided that we would use the Art in Public Places Committee of our board as the advisory committee for the project. We basically wanted it to be a two-part project. First of all, the exhibit, and [secondly], the catalog itself. And we wanted the artworks that would be selected to be done by people who were not going to be influenced by our board or staff. Our objective was to find an installation designer and a graphic artist who could work together, serve as co-curators of the exhibit, and then do their projects separately.

So the advisory committee recommended that Tom Klobe do the installation design—he's the gallery director here at the University [of Hawai'i]—and that Momi Cazimero do the graphic design on the catalog. Now, they are both (former) Ken Kingrey students. Ken Kingrey, if you don't know, was like the visual design professor over here at the university and really top drawer. I mean, he's to visual design what Preis is to SFCA. They were two of his successful students (who were able to work together very nicely). So eventually we were able to contract with both of them to first curate the show, and then Tom did the design and installation at the Amfac Plaza [Exhibition Room], and Momi did the publication.

I take great pride in that publication, because it really set a precedent. And I think there are a couple of states who are hoping to be able to do projects like that in the same way.

JR: Something that I probably should've brought up earlier but didn't get around to is the SFCA as art buyer in a competitive art market. Someone once told me that people going to art shows were frustrated because by the time they got there, even if it was opening night, the SFCA had already bought the good stuff.

JR: True. Well, one thing was—one fact of life here in Hawai'i is that there aren't a whole lot of buyers of fine arts, not with the consistency or on the scale of the foundation. We were there at every major show trying to get in line first. And the fact is that we, maybe, were being accused of being greedy, because anything that was outstanding, we wanted it for the collection, for the people of Hawai'i. When people would come in later hoping to buy things for themselves or their collection, of course, all the best pieces were taken. And I think that is a good confirmation of how well our system works, our acquisition committee system.

The thing is, though, that we didn't always have first crack. I mean, at the Artists of Hawai'i show, the academy of arts had their first crack at it. And the foundations that supported them—the Watumull Foundation, McInerny—were making their selections before us (because the academy staff was given that responsibility). At the [Honolulu] Advertiser building, in the Contemporary Arts Center---the [Thurston and Laila] Twigg-Smiths are the only other real buyers in the state, I mean people who go after art with any kind of real interest or intent to buy. So they (usually) bought the one we wanted, but we'd get the second best in that case. But it was not a real competitive thing. We were looking out for the interest of the state and trying to get what we felt would be good for the people of

Hawai'i.

Your buyer from the general public is not going to go in normally and buy a \$5,000 painting. There are very few people like that, especially from an open-juried show. I mean, you got to be kidding me if you're going to claim that you would walk into a show looking to spend five grand. It's like the serious people who are willing to put down five grand know whose work they want to buy, and they're going to either go out and commission that specific artist or they're going to go to a gallery which features a certain artist's work. So it's like these open-juried shows, which were the primary source of our acquisitions, we were going in and sometimes buying ten pieces. And they ranged in price from fifty dollars up to several thousands. And of course, if there was a real gem on the wall that was like a hundred dollars that your uncle wanted, and he walked in and went, "Wow, damn that state foundation, they did it again." Well, to me, that's not that valid. We're consistent, and because we beat out people when they had the urge to buy once in five years, to me, that's sour grapes.

JR: Have you ever had any problems dealing with artists you've commissioned? I don't think it's in artist's nature to be real businesslike, especially if they haven't been involved in something of that scale before. And working with the state is probably another thing all together.

RY: Well, definitely it's been a problem. Artists---some are easier to work with than others, some are more businesslike. It's not been easy by any means. Those artists who are really creative and needing to make objects are not necessarily concerned about deadlines. However, the more experienced and the more mature they get, the more reality affects them. And that is, you don't get paid until you finish the work. And it has been the source of a lot of concern.

And in fact, one of the biggest things in the audit pointed out that we were purchasing or commissioning very few artists for the majority of the work. And after---not at that time, but after many years on the job I realized that the reason for that was because those artists could perform. They did the job, and they completed it to the satisfaction of all the concerned parties. And that's what you need. The younger artists who are, maybe for the first time, getting the opportunity to work on a large scale, I feel like it's my duty to help them along, to assist them and nurture them and advise them so that they become better able to cope with the demands of the business side of this business. Most artists are trained in the studio. They make a piece, and it's like they feel, oh, that's it. But for us, we're concerned about how long the piece is going to stay up and how it was engineered. So we have other kinds of legitimate concerns that these people need to realize. And to get them to do all it takes to complete a project successfully is sometimes time consuming and difficult, but it's worth it to see them grow and to see them succeed.

JR: You told me something interesting about the collection as a whole over twenty years now, and I want to get you to repeat it before we are through with the interview.

RY: Yeah, it was something that Alfred Preis pointed out to me, and it goes back to my saying that we would go in there first and have first crack and get all the best stuff. And the thing is that when you look at the state foundation's collection in its entirety, it is like it's a compressed version of the art history of Hawai'i. Because we've strived to represent all of the various media, I think it really shows the growth and the course that visual arts took over the years the Art in Public Places (program) has been acquiring works. So I think when you look at it in those terms, I think people would be surprised how each medium has evolved. It's really neat to see how ceramics grew, how weaving grew, photography, you know, as well as painting and sculpture and that kind of stuff, the more traditional things.

JR: What do you see for the future? What are some of your goals? I mean, you've got a truck now. (Chuckles)

RY: Yeah, we've got a---well now, almost. Well, our plans for the future are to hire probably about a minimum of eight more staff members. If we can do that—and that may sound like a pipe dream to some people—we'll be in good hands for many years to come. The new law has allowed us to budget for improvements to the program. And I can't give enough credit to the state comptroller, Russel Nagata, and Governor Waihee's administration for supporting what we've done. They haven't turned down our requests. In fact, the comptroller was instrumental in getting the law passed and also in getting us the distribution facility that we'll be working out of to rotate the works around the state.

But what I see in the future, in terms of the relocatable collection, is the establishment of mini galleries in public areas, in lobbies and that type of things, where we can install traveling displays. I think there's more impact when you're able to exhibit fifteen or twenty pieces and provide all of the educational material that goes along with it, provided we can find the spaces in the buildings.

But in the area of commissions, we've been headed in the direction of more—well, better-integrated projects, projects that are conceived and designed to enhance the architecture, works that will serve as landmarks, perhaps, and works that will tell a story about Hawai'i to our visitors. We're involved in a really exciting project at the airport now. Because they are building a half-a-billion-dollar (terminal), we're thinking about \$5 million dollars worth of art, minimum, for the international arrivals building. And it's been exciting because the architects and their interior designers have been meeting with us to select sites and to set up the sites so that we can integrate the artworks there. And it's going to be so huge that they're talking about a three-story sculpture and that kind of stuff.

I think what we want to do is also ensure that the neighbor islands get their fair share of exhibits. The whole intent of the program was so that people wouldn't have to travel great distances to view fine art. And we're trying to get out there in the rural areas and on the neighbor islands so that those people, especially the children, can benefit from seeing the collection. I think it serves as an inspiration to children, not necessarily so that they would aspire to be an artist, but I think it helps them to grow spiritually just by being able to see different things (firsthand)

and experience more than just what their families could afford to show them.

I think on the national (and international) level I'd like to see us continue to be in a leadership role and perhaps get into some major exchanges with other states (and countries), with artists, and hopefully be able to conduct symposiums or workshops, even do temporary projects on large sites, like state park sites. I'd really like to see a state museum somehow established, the Alfred Preis Museum.

JR: Good name.

RY: Yeah, I think so.

JR: Works from the Art in Public Places collection?

RY: Yeah, yeah. The fact is that our collection has grown. And we could, well, aside from our own collection, show all kinds of stuff. There is enough work in the collection now so that we can set up complete exhibits based on certain specifics, topics or subject matter, and it would be nice to be able to have it all under one roof, rather than. . . . I mean, not to take the place of the relocatable exhibitions, but to really serve as the headquarters and as the flagship of the foundation itself.

What else? I'd like to see more international artists commissioned for major sites, and I'd like to see some of our local artists also commissioned to do major works. There's just—you know, it's like it's almost endless. The thing is, it's like we're at the beginning of a new era because of this new law, and the potential is kind of mind-boggling. It's like there's so much. When you really start thinking about it, it gets scary. Because we've been kind of like stifled for so long, knowing what we want to do, and now it's like, wow, a kid in a candy shop, man, anything you want.

We're definitely going to take care of first things first. We need to computerize our collection, take care of the conservation survey and those needs, really get our relocatable exhibitions program into full operation, and [construct] commissioned works out of more durable materials. It's like we've experimented a lot with all kinds of things—wood, fibers, plastics, and that kind of stuff—and it looks like we're going back to the old classics, bronze and stone and those type of things that are almost indestructible. And I hope we can continue to strive for excellence. That's what it's about. It's going to be exciting, though. That's about all I—I'm sure I can think of more, but. . . .

JR: When you tell people what you do for a living, what's their reaction?

RY: Yeah, the first thing they say is, "Wow, that sounds like a lot of fun. It sounds exciting."

And I go, "Yeah, it is." 'Cause I tend to forget about all the hassles and stuff. But in general, they think my job is a lot of glamour. In fact, all the people who have applied for positions in my program—and Lisa included, and the previous curator—it's like they think that the position is so glamorous. All you do is go out

and buy art, and you got this blank checkbook, and you're playing the game, and you're a big whip. Lisa, after five years with us now, is like—boy, she knows what burnt out means. Because it's a struggle, daily. And for that much—for the little bit of glamour that people perceive, there's a lot of grief and just tremendous amounts of hard work. It takes a special kind of fool to make the commitment to stay in this business. (Chuckles)

JR: Well, I don't have any more questions for you.

RY: Well, thanks for the opportunity.

JR: Yeah, yeah. Well, thank you, you've given me all day here.

RY: I enjoyed it. I'm sorry I kind of couldn't get it out and articulate it in a better way, but that's what happens when you grow up in Kapahulu (chuckles) and you only go surfing.

END OF INTERVIEW

**The State Foundation
on Culture and the Arts**

An Oral History

**Center for Oral History
Social Science Research Institute
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